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SERIALS CUTS (AND THE USE OF A BLUNT KNIFE)

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There can be few serials librarians today who have not had to implement some rationalisation of their serials budget over the last few years. Whether actual cancellations have been made will depend on the type of library one is employed in and the individual financial circumstances of that library or institution. At this early stage, we should perhaps point out that much of the emphasis in this paper will be directed towards academic libraries as this is the area of librarianship in which we the writers have experience.

A wide range of literature has been written on the subject of serials cuts - ranging from the simple "how we did it and the mistakes we made" type, to the complex modelling exercises undertaken and published by large American research libraries. We feel that somewhere between those two extremes, lies some middle-of-the-road method of serials collection revision which could be applicable to most multi-disciplinary libraries; given today's almost inevitable lack of human and financial resources. In this paper we intend to look firstly, at the rather basic methods implemented in the initial stages of budget cuts; and then we will progress to more sophisticated, evaluative methods which provide solid information upon which to base collection development decisions.

If we are honest, most of our serials collections have been built in a haphazard, random way, often on a first come, first served basis. In times of plentiful resources and relatively cheap serials there is nothing wrong with this approach, but it will not work under current conditions.

Over the past few years, libraries in general budget terms have been feeling the combined results of inflation and the falling dollar/sterling exchange rate. Where serials are concerned, percentage price increases have soared way above the level of inflation. One needs only to scan the LAR/Blackwells Periodical Prices tables¹ to see the staggering rates of increase. The following figures, prepared from the previously mentioned tables, show these increases quite vividly. Each year, in all subjects, the average price is up. Each year in all subjects, the percentage increase is up. The average annual increase in 1980 was 5.8%; by 1982 it has risen incredibly to over 22%.

No doubt you have all worked out your own in-house statistics; these will obviously reflect your local situation. For example, the Loughborough figure for the academic year 1981/82 settled at a 21% increase, which, bearing in mind our technological bias (but excluding Medicine) fits neatly in with the Blackwells calculations.

	No. of Titles	% Increase			Average Price		
		1980	1981	1982	1980	1981	1982
Humanities	842	4.2	12.2	19.3	19.89	22.36	26.61
Medicine	204	6.8	11.0	25.6	43.00	47.84	60.10
Sci. & Tech.	961	6.0	12.3	22.6	71.22	79.71	97.58
Total	2007	5.8	12.2	22.3	46.81	52.41	64.00

PERIODICAL PRICES 1980-1982

Clearly library budgets cannot keep up with this ever rising cost of materials; what is more important is that they are unlikely to do so again in the near future. The halcyon days of the early sixties are over and unlikely to return. This means that librarians must sit back and take a long hard look at their serials collection. We are no longer in a position to indulge our fantasies of complete "stand-alone" scholarly research collections. Herbert White says in his article "Strategies and Alternatives in dealing with the Serials Management Budget"² ... "librarians addicted to neat and orderly systems; love serials" ... Richard De Gennaro goes further in his paper "Escalating Journal Prices"³ ... "Journals", he says, "are the sacred cows of libraries" ... There is no doubt that these views must change. We must start to regard our serials collections as environment responsive; as dynamic and constantly changing. Above all, a tool to be used.

So, how are we as library managers facing up to this new reality? Have we merely adopted tactics to delay the evil day of decision making? Or are we well and truly versed in the art of de-selection procedures?

Until relatively recently our standard response to the dilemma of rising prices has been to ask for higher budgets. But, for how long can the library go on taking an ever increasing slice of the budget - particularly in an academic institution where it is only one of a number of central support services? In the University situation it simply means that Departmental budgets are constantly eroded until a point is reached where our academic colleagues begin to protest that money for important research equipment is no longer available. Sympathy for the library does not last long under these conditions.

When first confronted by financial stringencies most librarians did not recognise the danger signals. It was considered a temporary aberration; the situation would improve. Herbert White⁴ has been studying the economic interaction of librarians and publishers of scholarly materials for some years now. He has identified certain popular tactics deployed by librarians in the first stage of budgetary restrictions. To state this more expressively, these are our "blunt knife" tactics.

The first is placing a moratorium on new serial subscriptions. Whilst this may be acceptable in the short-term, creating a breathing space for the library to assess its plan of campaign, it should not become long term policy. It is a negative reaction which merely perpetuates the old philosophy of protecting the integrity and continuity of the collection. Nor will it maintain the status quo for long with the escalating prices of journals!

This tactic is usually supplanted by the "new for old" policy. Users are informed that new subscriptions will be placed, providing that a title of equivalent value is cancelled - stipulated of course, to be within their own subject area. We all know how easy it is for other departments journals to be considered non-essential. By this action we are moving part way towards the "dynamic, changing collection" we spoke of earlier. By very definition, serial literature should provide current, up-to-date information on new technologies and expanding research endeavours. New journals of direct interest to our user groups are bound to keep appearing; we cannot close our serials collection as we did so conveniently our old card catalogues.

Thirdly, duplicate subscriptions are cancelled. Outwardly, this decision appears to be a rational one; but make no mistake, it still has the integrity of the collection at heart and it disregards the important need for information access by users. Hand-in-hand with duplicate cancellations goes cancellation of expensive foreign language titles. It is no doubt true that these fall into the category of little-used journals, but do we always check their availability elsewhere, before cancelling? These could be the very titles not easily obtainable on Interlibrary Loan.

This point leads on rather conveniently to a consideration of resource sharing. Interestingly enough, no-one has yet unearthed any evidence of this being considered an important factor in the retention or cancellation of journal titles. As far as users are concerned, even a five minute walk to another site library can be a considerable deterrent to consultation. While the University Grants Committee urges university libraries to cooperate in resource sharing, much of the effort in this direction is cosmetic or political.

From our own local investigations, we have shown that at present it works out quicker and cheaper to obtain a photocopy for user retention from the British Library, than obtain the same item from one of our neighbouring academic institutions. Having said that, we are at present producing a Union List of the current holdings of Loughborough, Nottingham and Leicester University libraries, with the hope of extending it in the near future to other local institutions. It is to be a COM microfiche format and will be displayed alongside our own Serials Holdings List. It remains to be seen whether it will stimulate personal use of other collections by our users.

The fifth and final delaying tactic is the transfer of money from the monograph budget. It is interesting to look back at the Parry Report of 1967. This suggests figures which when translated into percentages, indicate that 53% of the budget should be spent on books and 21% on periodicals. Expressed slightly differently the recommendation is that 28% of the total acquisitions budget should be spent on periodicals. The following table shows an analysis of the actual expenditure in 1980/81 of six university libraries (figures prepared by SCONUL).

Percentage of Acquisition Budget Spent on Periodicals (1980/81)

City	41
Kent	42.7
Bristol	49.2
Birmingham	57.1
Edinburgh	58
Cardiff	66

While admitting that it is a little difficult to do comparative analysis between institutions, due to local definitions of the terms periodical and serial, we can nevertheless see a distinct increase on the Parry recommendations.

From the complete set of SCONUL figures, the median for all university libraries, worked out at 48.2%, which is a 20% increase on the 1967 recommendations. The highest figure is 66% at Cardiff, which is a 38% increase on Parry. Such an erosion of the monograph budget has considerable implications for libraries and one does not need to be a mathematical genius to see that this transfer method is only a temporary stop-gap situation.

If we now turn again to the six points just considered:

Moratorium on New Serial Subscriptions

"New for Old" Policy

Cancellation of Duplicate Titles

Cancellations of Foreign Language Titles

Review of Resource Sharing

Transfers from Monograph Budget

It can be seen quite clearly that these remedies have not benefited our collection a great deal, nor, I would think, our standing as professional library managers. It may sometimes feel as if our academic colleagues expect us to perform miracles within our restricted budgets. Perhaps we cannot perform miracles, but we can improve upon this situation.

Our 'blunt knife' tactics have provided a breathing space but we have now reached an important turning point - indeed the "crunch point", when a comprehensive review of the collection needs to take place. In order for objective management decisions to be made we need to know and understand our collection. The way in which to do this is to develop a collection profile, which can be built up of a number of factors, depending a great deal, on time and personnel available for the task.

As a starting point, most librarians will begin by analysing journal circulation statistics and probably instigating some form of use survey. Stage 1 is the collection and analysis of use statistics. Journal circulation records can provide information and insight into the use of our collection, depending of course, on the availability of such records. Many academic libraries do not lend journals: those that do may limit borrowing to certain categories of user (for example, staff and research postgraduates). Records of photocopying, if the library operates a photocopying service can also constitute a useful guide to journal usage.

Although standard use surveys can be contentious and probably provide fairly inaccurate information, most libraries at some time, opt to undertake such a survey. One of two methods is usually employed. The first involves sticking a form to the cover of every current journal part and asking users to initial it every time they consult the issue. Naturally the system is open to abuse as results can be falsified by one person who initials every form in sight or by readers not willing to cooperate in a survey of this kind (or even by the ones who forget to bring a pen into the library!).

The other type of survey is selective. The current issues of a number of titles - selected by library staff - are removed from the current display shelves and readers are notified that the title is available from the Serials Office, or the Issue Desk - wherever use can easily be monitored. Again, it can produce misleading results as this method does inhibit browsing, and maybe even consultation if the user is in a hurry. But it can produce some interesting results. Over a twelve week period at Loughborough, we placed 22 titles on "closed access". Of these 22, seven titles were never requested (one of those being the "Proceedings of the Royal Society B", which as we all know, every self respecting academic library should stock). The highest number of requests turned out to be for "Journal of Chromatography", which, as a point of interest, was also No. 1 requested item in the latest British Library Rank List of Serial Requests⁵. Such an exercise may make us consider, as an aside to the main objectives, cancelling titles with a low current issues usage and purchasing blocks of back runs when funds become available.

Some of the larger European research libraries are in a distinctly enviable position when it comes to conducting surveys of journal use, as many of their collections are entirely closed access and thus use can be monitored very effectively.

To return to our profile, we have now completed the first stage of development. We have looked at journal circulation and photocopying statistics where available and undertaken some form of current use survey. The danger of relying too much on the information provided in this first stage of profile development, is in the limitation of preferences to what is currently in stock, without regard for what should be available. Step two takes account of this.

Interlibrary Loan statistics provide a very good indicator of what has actively been sought outside the library's own collection. Most libraries are able to gather together statistics in this area: it is traditionally a well documented library function.

The first two stages of our profile have been limited to internal library evaluation. Having spoken earlier of the "environment responsive" collection, the third stage must be to involve and consult our users. This usually involves circulating various user groups with lists of current serial titles, with such additional information as publishers, cost, etc., remembering to leave ample space for user annotation. Libraries with automated serials listings have a definite advantage over those with completely manual systems, although the University of Hull successfully completed just such an exercise in 1977 using manually compiled lists. Details of their operation can be found in an article entitled "Periodical cancellations: what happened at Hull"⁶. A further important factor which will influence the way in which this exercise is structured is the distribution of the serials budget. If departments are allocated a percentage of the budget then they can be set target percentage decreases on a given list of "their own" serials. At Loughborough our serials budget is held as a global amount. We believe that this provides us with a flexibility essential in serials management due to the large amount of subject interest overlap. This does however make it difficult for us to "assign" journals to departments. For this very reason, the review we are conducting at present is not directed to the individual departments within the University but to the four Boards of Studies: the Schools of Engineering, Pure and Applied Science, Human and Environmental Studies, and Education and Humanities.

The most usual grading method departments are asked to apply to the titles on the lists, is one ranging from A-D where A indicates an essential core title and D a marginal interest title. This method can cause problems if a department refuses to allocate anything less than A to all its titles: this did happen to us during a small-scale survey we conducted last year. Another method to be considered, is asking staff to rank all their titles from one downwards. It must be born in mind when conducting this survey, that academic staff, as well as librarians, are rather

fond of journals. As we know, they strongly dislike seeing any of "their" subscriptions cancelled. However, this attitude is hardly surprising when it is widely appreciated that academic career prospects depend largely on prolific publishing, and the vehicle for this is the journal. Understandably academics have vested interests in the continuation and prosperity of journal publishing.

Thus in order for this exercise to be successfully undertaken by the library, it must be seen to be carried out in a professional manner. Robert Goehlert expresses a very important point when he says:

"If we are to maintain a modicum of credibility in the academic community, we must articulate our collection development policies in ways our constituents can both understand, and having understood, believe in ..."

A useful public relations exercise at this stage of the operation, is for the librarian or senior members of the library staff, to attend faculty meetings, to explain our aims and objectives. This personal contact can be reinforced by attaching to all circulating lists, a brief but clear definition of the principles of evaluation and ranking, summarising the important factors to be considered. Robin Downes, in a recently published article on "Journal Use Studies ..." defines concisely what these important factors should be. They are:

- Relation to curriculum and research
- Relation to total collection
- Reputation of publisher and contributors
- Breadth and quantity of demand
- Cost
- Accessibility from other sources
- Indexing in standard sources

In reality we cannot and should not ask academic staff to consider all these aspects. Certain ones remain the overall province of the library manager. But academic staff should be asked to consider library holdings at least in the light of the following:

- Relation to ongoing research and curriculum needs;
- Reputation of publisher and contributors;
- Demand - as seen from the user point of view, and
- Cost.

Library staff should, of course take all these points into consideration, backed up by faculty knowledge. One factor which some librarians place great emphasis upon is the final point "indexing in standard sources". There is no doubt that inclusion in frequently used indexes such as "Science Citation Index" or "British Humanities Index" can be a useful indicator particularly in drawing up core lists of titles. A development of this methodology, is the technique of citation analysis, which measures the number of citations to articles in the journals of a particular subject area. Citation analysis has been widely used and reported in the literature; but the most recent research, questions its validity in multi-disciplinary collections. Maurice Line concludes his paper entitled, "On the irrelevance of citation analyses to practical librarianship" by saying ... "The sooner the practical limitations of citation studies are recognised, the more they can be refined and used for purposes to which they are suited..."

But let us now return to the practicalities of our profile building exercise. The final block of our profile is now almost complete. Our users have been consulted. They have worked from our guidelines on evaluative procedures and will (hopefully) have considered their subject section of the serials collection in the light of these criteria.

What happens now is that a large amount of data descends upon our poor unsuspecting serials librarian. Correlating this data, will, without question, be a time-consuming business; but the final results should be worthwhile. At the end of the day sufficient information should be available for objective management decisions to be made. The information, when analysed, will have been collected from a number of different sources. None of these sources could, or even should, have been used alone as a dominant element in the decision to retain or cancel particular titles, but when balanced and considered in relation to one another they constitute evidence for informed decision making.

Immediate results from the profile will be firstly the development of local core lists of titles, which can, in the mid-term, be protected from cancellation. Secondly, marginal interest titles can be identified and cancelled, leaving scope for new titles to be introduced. Much will also have been learned about our user groups and faculty interests in general. This should give a much more authoritative basis for future collection management and development.

Cancellation of subscriptions was, of course, one welcome result, but the primary goal was to evaluate the collection as a functioning unit. As far as the future is concerned the collection profile should not be seen as a one-off exercise which will hold true for many years to come. The experience of building it will have set out useful and relevant criteria not only for de-selection purposes but also for selection purposes. The list of criteria for cancelling titles holds equally good for instigating new subscriptions, which, from this point in time, will necessarily need to be more critically evaluated. To quote one of Loughborough's senior professors during a recent Library Committee meeting; we have reached a "socially acceptable" conclusion.

But, what does the future hold for our serials collection? What is the future of journals as we know them? Richard De Gennaro states categorically ... "The real problem is that scholarly and research journals, particularly in the sciences, are in serious trouble and the system for supporting them is breaking down ..." He feels that librarians, by paying higher institutional rates for journals are subsidising the dissemination of scholarly literature. "It is time", he continues, "to let the forces of the market place take over and create a new environment for the journal and whatever forms will evolve in competition with it ..." ¹⁰.

The point is a valid one.

But what forms will evolve, or even are evolving, in competition with the journal as we know it? One sees many articles in the literature concerning document delivery, facsimile transmission, the electronic journal, etc., and many articles suggesting that libraries and librarians themselves will be redundant before the end of the century. Before our imaginations run riot with these ideas it might be as well to remember that there are certain things that will remain constant. Whereas our familiar hard copy journals may not be around in the future, the information contained within the covers of these journals will still be written and researched, and will still be required by the scientific and academic community. The continued existence of this communication cycle is certain. At present, machine readable data bases exist hand-in-hand with printed databases: we are in an ever changing, but interim phase. At some point in the not too distant future there will begin a natural progression from electronic production of print, to electronic publication and dissemination. Certainly many journals will exist only in electronic form. Where this places our serials collection is a little uncertain, and we feel that we should leave the crossing of that bridge for future papers!

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